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ABSTRACT

Research in person perception has shown that children's descriptions of themselves and others evolve from being concrete and superficial during childhood to being abstract and inferential during adolescence. Such research was extended by focusing on the constructs 6-14 years-olds (N=106) use to describe the identifications they have formed with their role-models. Results support the previous research and indicate that first graders use the most appearance and role terms to describe their interpersonal relationships, fifth and ninth graders use the most global evaluation terms, and ninth graders use the most interest-based and inferred psychological constructs. (Author)

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Personal Construct Use in Role-Model Identification: A Developmental Study

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Abstract

Research in person perception (Crockett, 1965; Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Montemayer & Eisen, 1977; etc.,) has shown that children's descriptions of themselves and others evolve from being concrete and superficial during childhood to being abstract and inferential during adolescence. This study was directed at extending that research by focusing on the constructs 6-14 year-olds (N = 106) use to describe the identifications they have formed with their role-models. Results support the previous research and indicate that first graders use the most appearance and role terms to describe their interpersonal relationships, fifth and ninth graders use the most global evaluation terms, and ninth graders use the most interest-based and inferred psychological constructs.

Personal Construct Use in Role-Model Identification: A Developmental Study

In recent years there has been a considerable increase in attention paid to the structural changes that occur between childhood and adolescence in the types of constructs used to describe the self and others (Bigner, 1974; Crockett, 1965; Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Montemayer & Eisen, 1977; Peevers & Secord, 1973; Scarlett, Press, & Crockett, 1971). These studies which are based upon Piagetian (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) and Wernerian (Werner, 1961) approaches to social-cognitive development, have demonstrated that children's descriptions of themselves and others change qualitatively as they grow older. Although these studies present elaborate evidence that children's perceptions of themselves and their acquaintances evolve from being concrete, egocentric, and superficial in middle childhood, to being abstract, less egocentric, and profound in adolescence, this process of change has not been documented in regard to the way children think about the complex self-other relationships underlying role-model identifications.

Rather than viewing the development of children's conceptions of themselves and others as separate entities, the intent of this investigation (as part of a larger study) was to extend person-perception research by examining the constructs used to characterize the identifications children form with their role-models. In order to depict role-model identifications, persons must not only detail their own and others' personal attributes, but also those personological features which describe the relationship existing between themselves and others. It was hypothesized that children's descriptions of the conceptual foundations of their identifications would change from being appearance and behavior

based (concrete) in middle childhood to being based upon abilities, interests, and psychological dispositions (abstract) in adolescence.

METHOD

Subjects. The subjects of this study were 106 females and males drawn from the first, third, fifth, and ninth grades of an urban mid-western school district. The population was racially mixed (21% black) and was composed of 25 first graders, 25 third graders, 21 fifth graders, and 35 ninth graders. The mean ages of the children in each respective grade were 83.0, months, 107.9 months, 131.1 months, and 177.9 months. All students participated on a voluntary basis and were assured of confidentiality of personal information.

Role Construct Repertory Test. An Identification Grid adaptation of the Role Construct Repertory Test (Kelly, 1955) was used to assess the verbal constructs used to describe identification relationships. The Repertory Test was devised by George Kelly as a way of outlining the psychological structures that constitute persons' interpersonal relationships. The standard application of the method proceeds by eliciting from subjects the names of their acquaintances who fit into significant social roles (best friend, liked-teacher, employer, etc.,). The subjects are then presented with a number of systematically arranged triads of these elicited names (often including the "self" as one of the group members), and are asked to indicate in what important way two of the three persons presented in each comparison triad are alike and how the third person is different from the other two. Through this manner of questioning, the investigator not only gains information as to the structure of the subjects' interpersonal relationships (which persons are perceived to be the most similar), but is also apprised of the content of the constructs underlying

these relationships.

Prior research using Repertory Test protocols has focused on both aspects of the individuals' patterns of response. Interpersonal relationship networks have been analyzed for complexity of structure, fixedness, and lopsidedness (cf. Bannister, 1960, 1962; Fransella, 1968), while construct content has been analyzed for its complexity, depth, and diversity of application to each of the individuals presented on the protocol (Bieri, 1955, 1966; Crockett, 1965; Scarlett, Press, & Crockett, 1971). In spite of the fact that the Repertory Test and its various hybrids have been widely used and accepted in clinical and personality psychology (for comprehensive reviews see; Adams-Webber, 1979; Bannister & Mair, 1968), it is only recently that applications have broadened to include social-developmental research (Bannister & Agnew, 1977; Barratt, 1977a, 1977b; Barenbiom, 1976; Duck, 1975).

Current adaptation. The subjects were individually administered Identification Grids (Williams, 1980) by one of three graduate students. Each subject was taken to a testing room and asked the following preliminary questions; "Of all the teachers that you have had, which one do you like the best?";"Which teacher do you like the next best?"; "Who is your best friend?"; "Who is your next best friend?" The subjects' responses to each of these questions were recorded on separate index cards. After these questions were answered, the interviewers took three additional cards, and in the view of the subject explained that they were going to make cards that read "mom," "dad," and "Me." The students' parents' given names were also recorded on the appropriate cards and the interviewers explained that "'Me' means you!" and that the subjects were to try to think about themselves as "you are today."

The participants were then presented with 15 systematically arranged triads of names (each possible pair of the six role-models' names combined with the "Me" tag), and were asked upon presentation of each set of three cards to tell the interviewers in what important way two of the three persons were most alike and how the third person differed from the other two. Because the "Me" tag appeared in each triad, the subjects were forced to compare themselves to various pairs of their acquaintances and to simultaneously assess their similarity to each person in each pair. On a separate scoring sheet the interviewers recorded the subjects' responses to these questions by circling the names of the two most similar persons and by copying down the exact words the subjects used to describe their perceptions of interpersonal similarities and differences. Each of the names of the subjects' acquaintances were presented together once and only once.

Scoring. Content analysis classified the subjects' verbal responses to the Identification Grid as focusing on appearance or physical attributes, role, global evaluations, behaviors or situational referents, interests or physical abilities, or inferred psychological attributes. Inter-coder reliability on a cross sectional subset of the protocols was 0.87. Only instances where subjects "identified" with others were used for these analyses.

RESULTS

Analysis of individuals' verbal responses to the Identification Grid indicate that first graders use the most appearance constructs, F (3, 102) = 6.34, $p < .0001$, and the most role terms, F (3, 102) = 5.45, $p < .01$, to

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Insert Table 1 about here

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describe their relationships with others, while behavioral constructs were more or less used equally by all age groups. Fifth and ninth graders shared a significant dominance in the use of global evaluations (I like him, they are good teachers), over the first and third graders, F (3, 102) = 9.16, $p < .0001$, and ninth graders used the most interest-based concepts, F (3, 102) = 17.94, $p < .0001$, and inferred psychological constructs, F (3, 102) = 14.10, $p < 0001$, as descriptors of their interpersonal relationships. Analyses of content usage collapsed over grade independently for race and sex showed no significant differences on any of the outcome measures.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained by content analyzing the subjects' verbal responses to the Identification Grid clearly support the hypothesis that younger children employ more concrete, egocentric, and superficial terms than adolescents to describe their relationships with others, while adolescents offer more involved representations of these interactions. These findings are consistent with those reported in other person-perception research (Bannister & Agnew, 1977; Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Montemayer & Eisen, 1977; etc.,), and lend additional support to the argument that structural changes in the breadth and complexity of social perceptions do occur between childhood and adolescence. This shift in the types of constructs elicited from subjects to characterize their interpersonal ties is most likely reflective of adolescents' newly developed capacity for inferring their own and others' psychological states, interests, and abilities, from concrete characteristics and behaviors that are held in common with others.

If these new found cognitive abilities are seen in conjunction with

the more demanding, complicated, and sophisticated social environments adolescents experience, it becomes easy to understand why they are better able than pre-adolescents to judge themselves and others in more abstract and involved ways. These results also make it increasingly clear that there is a qualitative difference in the amount and complexity of information children of different ages distill from essentially the same types of personological data.

It also appears that the descriptions elicited to portray the foundations of interpersonal relationships have the same fundamental structure as those descriptors used to discuss the self and others as separate entities, (cf. Bannister & Agnew, 1977; Barratt, 1977a, 1977b; Bigner, 1974; Crockett, 1965; Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Peevers & Secord, 1973; Scarlett, Press, & Crockett, 1971). If these constructs are accurate reflections of the bases of identifications, and there is no reason to believe otherwise, then this phenomenon can be more clearly understood as a conscious process that is mediated by the identifier, at least, and possibly by the role-model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978). A productive test of this proposition would elicit from individuals and their role-models the terms they use to describe their relationships with each other. Charting the correspondence between these two (or more) sets of constructs would reveal if individuals actually share the same conceptions about their social ties or if personal constructs are indeed of a very private nature.

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Table 1

Mean Number of Personal Constructs Used to Describe Identifications by Type by Grade

Construct Type	Grade							
	First		Third		Fifth		Ninth	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Appearance	4.20	4.97	3.36	3.89	2.04	2.74	.62	1.23
Role	3.88	4.22	2.88	2.69	2.19	2.92	.94	1.43
Behavior	2.96	4.40	3.76	3.09	2.71	2.10	2.42	2.34
Interest	.36	.86	1.00	1.65	.61	1.07	3.00	2.07
Global Eval.	0.00	0.00	.48	1.41	2.47	2.83	2.11	2.44
Psychol.	0.00	0.00	.48	1.68	1.04	2.35	3.11	2.67
Misc.	.16	.80	0.00	0.00	.38	.92	.20	.40
	N = 25		N = 25		N = 21		N = 35	